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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: TAIWAN'S UN REFERENDA

Summary: Taiwan's presidential election, which will be held Saturday in tandem with two referenda seeking the island's UN membership, continued to stay in the spotlight of the Taiwan media on March 20. The pro-unification "United Daily News" front-paged a news story on AIT Taipei Director Stephen Young's visit to KMT Chairman Wu Poh-hsiung Tuesday; the story ran with the headline saying "The United States Expresses Concern about Whether Political Power Will Be Transferred Peacefully." Several other papers also carried similar news story on their inside pages. In terms of editorials and commentaries, editorials in the pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" and "Taiwan News" both called on the Taiwan voters to cast their ballots for Saturday's UN referenda so as to demonstrate to the world that "Taiwan is a sovereign nation." End summary.

A) "It's Use It or Lose it on Saturday"

The pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" [circulation: 30,000] editorialized (3/20):

"Anyone who believed that China respects Taiwanese people should have been roused from their stupor after Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao on Tuesday reiterated Beijing's line that Taiwan is an inseparable part of China. The timing of Wen's comments -- concurrent with Beijing's bloody crackdown on protesting Tibetans -- drives home the need for Taiwanese to vote in Saturday's referendum and make it known that Taiwan is not a province of China. ... The more Taiwanese democracy draws the attention of the international community, the better it can demonstrate that Taiwan is a sovereign nation.

"Clinging to Wen's coattails, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Thomas Christensen also spoke on Tuesday against the referendums, branding them 'pointless and destabilizing' and 'unnecessary and unhelpful.' Wen and Christensen simply will not concede that Taiwanese democracy is an issue for Taiwanese.

"On Saturday, Taiwan has the opportunity to show the world just how different it is from autocratic China. The issue is all the more important after the UN Office of Legal Affairs on Tuesday again snubbed an expression of support by Taiwan's allies for the nation's admission into the world body. The new government to be formed on May 20 may very well give up on the UN bid if neither referendum succeeds. Indeed, how can Taiwan ask its allies to speak for it if the nation doesn't stand up for itself on Saturday?"

B) "Importance of Referendums"

The pro-independence, English-language "Taiwan News" [circulation: 20,000] editorialized (3/20):

"... The result of Saturday's vote may well determine whether Taiwan

follows a road toward integration with the People's Republic of China and restores KMT 'one-party domination' or maintains its independence, democracy and a Taiwan-centric path of development. ... The two referendums, especially the DPP-sponsored 'U.N. for Taiwan' initiative, offer the first opportunity in our history for the 23 million people of Taiwan to express our collective will on whether they wish to have their own distinct representation in the world community. Approval of either referendum will not directly lead to actual U.N. membership, since only the members of the U.N. itself have the right to approve our application.

"However, passage of the initiative calling for an application to join the U.N. under the name of 'Taiwan' or even approval of the 'readmission' version will immeasurably bolster the legitimacy of Taiwan's effort to affiliate with the U.N. and will compel the U.N. to face the substantial question of the lack of representation for the people of Taiwan in the U.N. However, if both referendums fail to receive valid approval from the electorate, the Beijing regime will undoubtedly claim to the international media and world governments that the results confirm its position that calls for Taiwan's independence or self-determination or retaining our democratic system are only the 'voice of a small minority' or even declare that the majority of Taiwanese hope for unification with the PRC.

"Beijing will thereby receive more legitimacy to squeeze Taiwan out of international organizations or push for the subordination of our representation under its umbrella as 'Taipei, China,' similar to 'Hong Kong, China.' Last but not least, it will be virtually impossible for Taiwan's official allies or democratic friends in the U.N. to rebut Beijing's claim that 'Taiwan is a province of the People's Republic of China' and does not merit separate representation in the U.N. or other international bodies. What is even more painful is the fact that the KMT's decision to boycott both referendums for narrow partisan objectives will prevent Saturday's voting from truly reflecting the genuine collective will

and voice of the Taiwan people, whom favor U.N. participation by an overwhelming majority according to virtually all opinion polls. We urge all voters to set aside partisanship and realize that March 22 offers the first and perhaps only chance for the people of Taiwan to make their collective will heard in the world community."

YOUNG